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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the overall impact of culture in teacher and language training and learning and presents results of a study with English-as-a-Foreign Language teachers, both Mexican and non-Mexican, in a large urban university in Mexico from 1991-1993. The teacher survey found that most teachers rely heavily on personal experiences to define culture; they had strong opinions on the importance of culture in foreign language instruction and how language and culture are inseparable. A second phase of the study followed 6 teachers throughout a semester during their interaction with students in order to gain insight into the cultural experiences mentioned in phase one, and to find out how they impacted the actual teaching classes. A distinction was found between classroom teacher and student verbal interaction on linguistic aspects as well as cultural aspects; a degree of relationship between teacher beliefs on culture and teacher behavior was found, although it varied in intensity and depth. The impact of politics on the sharing of cultural knowledge is reviewed, and case examples are detailed. (Contains 47 references.) (NAV)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURE AND THE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

March 20, 1995

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El hecho de que alguien se quite los zapatos en una ciudad como esta o en cualquier lugar que se precie de civilizado...una persona que actúa así, dicen que está loco. ¿Porque? Porque quitarse un zapato implica quitarse la cultura? Los zapatos representan toda la cultura.

(The fact that someone takes off his shoes in a city like this, or in any place that calls itself civilized...a person who acts like that, they say he is crazy. Why? Because taking off your shoes means taking off culture. Shoes represent all of culture.)

When I think of culture as a whole, well...I think of people who have studied, or people who have had contact with many other things. And when I think of large social groups. I don't think of them as being.... They are part of the culture we have but as individuals I don't feel that they have culture.

I guess less developed groups of people have less culture. In Mexico we are rich in culture. If we speak historically, we go way back. Our country is rich because it goes back 3,000 years before Christ, if we remember the Mayas, the Aztecs, and so on. We are a rich country in comparison with the U. S. If we analyze contrastively the two cultures, ours is richer, much richer. The contrast I made was because in the United States you had the Indian groups, but before that there's no history. There's no culture before that.

These three overheard conversations take place as foreign language teachers express their ideas about the topic of culture. Each points to different underlying definitions of culture. In the first, culture is envisioned as being embodied in an object--*zapatos* (shoes), how and when that object is worn and the significance it has for the wearer. In the second, attributes of a person such as being "well-educated" translate into a person having culture. In the third, the historical vision held of a group of people creates degrees of culture. Each of these selected segments of conversation involves an unspoken definition of culture, each depending on what aspect of culture is focused on, such as symbols, education, or adaptive systems.

Culture plays a prominent role in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. To study a language involves studying cultural aspects tied to the language; culture and language are inseparable. Foreign language teachers are involved in teaching the meaning of language embedded in socio-cultural contexts. How they perceive of culture enters into their instructional behavior in the classroom. The relationship between their thinking about what culture means to language teaching and their actual teaching is central to understanding the teachers' involvement in student learning of a language, including its socio-cultural aspects.

The word "culture" is considered one of the most complex in the English language and has been involved in one of the oldest terminological wrangles in anthropology (D'Andrade, 1985). It is therefore not surprising that in the field of language study specialists and researchers have shown a reluctance to define "culture" (Seelye, 1976) while showing a desire to search for what culture should mean in foreign language teaching.

Recent interest in language teaching theory has led to the study of the role culture plays in learning of foreign languages. Various educational research projects have called attention to the uniqueness of culture and its inseparability from language (Byram, 1989; Byram, Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Byram Esarte-Sarries & Taylor, 1991). While these projects explored the effect of language teaching on students' views of people and the cultures associated with the languages being learned, they have also encouraged investigation into a much overlooked area of research: the relationship between teachers' involvement in language acquisition and the teaching of culture.

Cultural processes involved in the schooling of certain groups of society (ethnic, language, class and gender) in the United States and internationally (Macias, 1987, 1990;

Spindler, 1982; 1987) have been studied by educational anthropologists. They have looked at educational settings where socialization, enculturation, discontinuity, communitarian societies (Amish and Hutterite, for example), cultural transmission and "hidden agendas" are present (Gearing & Epstein, 1982; Heath, 1983,) and found language deeply involved in the interpersonal interactions, relationships, and participation in educational settings (Erickson & Schultz, 1982; Phillips, 1983, for example). In addition to these areas studied by educational anthropologists, researchers in the field of education have studied the interaction between the classroom teacher's thinking and action (Clark & Peterson, 1986), drawing on the finding that individuals' beliefs strongly influence their behavior (Pajares, 1992).

In the field of foreign language study, however, research on teacher thinking has been extremely limited, yet such research would be very valuable in tying together teacher thinking and instruction. Such research has implications for pedagogical decisions about the goals guiding language instruction. The relationship between teachers' perceptions of culture and instructional behavior is significant for the understanding of culture and language and serves to begin to answer the questions: Why should culture be taught in foreign language learning? and What socio-cultural aspects related to language should be taught? Awareness of research into this realm of teacher belief systems and behavior could draw teachers' attention to the importance of teacher preparation in establishing priorities for culture in the teaching of languages.

Even though there are few studies on teacher thinking about culture in foreign language acquisition research, a wealth of prescriptive literature exists, with guides to

general areas that the classroom teacher might include (Saville-Troike, 1978), topical lists for cross cultural themes (Valdes, 1986), and processes to use when systematically integrating language and culture (Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1989). The result has been the construction and exploration of mini-dramas, role playing and simulations for the strategies they provide the learner for adapting to cross-cultural situations (Seelye, 1976). This literature has aimed at producing students who acquire cultural versatility, are multi-cultural, critically reflective, or develop a competence for handling different cultures (Robinson, 1985).

Research on teacher thinking which been carried out in the general areas of education has explored a variety of subject matter settings. This tradition has studied the dialectical relationship between teacher thought and actions and produced numerous studies of teachers' beliefs which suggest that such beliefs strongly affect their behavior (Abelson, 1979; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1986 to name a few.). Moreover, teachers' beliefs have been found to be highly resistant to change (Bandura, 1986; Clark, 1988; Pajares, 1992). Research in the area of teachers' perceptions has aimed at understanding the causes of student performance and tying student achievement to the teacher (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Peterson & Barger, 1984).

Foreign language learning research draws upon the pool of research created by the study of teacher thought processes and teacher actions in educational settings (Clark & Peterson, 1986), but focuses on the role that teachers play in foreign language study, more specifically the area of culture in language teaching (Byram, 1989). Little is known about the foreign language teacher as a transmitter and handler of culture. The present study was designed to investigate the ways in which foreign language teachers, specifically university

English teachers, perceive the nature of culture and the relationship between these perceptions and behavior involving instructional tasks in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). An assumption of the study is that a relationship exists between teachers' notions of culture, their consideration of culture as a component of language teaching, and their actual classroom teaching.

Guided by these goals a long term qualitative study was carried out with EFL teachers in a large urban university in Mexico from 1991 to 1993. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and its complexity, informal interviewing and participant observation were selected in order to enable the researcher to describe the reality of what was happening in the classroom in depth (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The research followed the methodological procedures outlined in Spradley's (1979; 1980) Developmental Research Sequence for Informal Interviewing and Observation. Triangulation of data types and sources was carried out (Erickson, 1986; Spradley, 1979; and Van Lier, 1988). The process for data collection and analysis was cyclic throughout the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glazer & Strauss, 1967). The research design involved three phases: a preliminary study with teacher interviews; classroom observations; and final interviews with the teachers after the observations.

The first phase of the study was with Mexican and non-Mexican teachers in an English Department of the university. The purpose guiding this phase of the study which included 30 EFL teachers was to learn about teachers' perceptions and beliefs about culture and how they thought it should be included in language teaching. The importance of understanding what culture meant was an essential first step in designing a case study of

teacher classroom behavior. Intensive interviews with the teachers provided information about what they meant when they talked about culture in language learning.

It was found that teachers draw heavily upon personal experiences to be able to define culture; these past experiences framed their ideas by providing a background for their ideas. Primary among the findings from teachers' discussion of culture were the distinctive ways that teachers talked about culture, that is, how they perceived of it. These appeared as filters that colored teachers' discussions. Pajares (1992) has also used the term "filters" to describe how beliefs affect the interpretation of new phenomena.

The six primary filters found included:

1. culture is experiential,
2. culture is daily life,
3. culture is transmitted from one generation to another,
4. culture is knowledge gained through reading,
5. cultural institutions should be analyzed, and
6. culture means having a critical attitude.

Teachers' definitions of culture, both in general and in relation to foreign language teaching, tended to be distributed across the meaning categories of a model created from the comprehensive studies of Keesing (1989) and Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952). The meaning categories are represented in Table 1:

Table 1: Keesing (1981) and Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) grouping of culture.

Type		Emphasis	Key Statements
Keesing:	Kroeber & Kluckhohn:		
adaptive systems of ...	descriptive	on enumeration of context; comprehensive totality; customs and habits.	"complex whole, sum total"
	historical	on social heritage or tradition	
	normative	on rule or way; on ideas or values plus behavior	"a way of life of a people"
cognitive	psychological	on adjustment, on culture as a problem-solving device; on learning; on habit, ways of thinking a particular society used to meet its problems	"learned behavior habitual behavior"
structural systems	structural	on patterning or organization of culture; on culture as products or artifact; on symbols	"tools, acts, beliefs, attitudes"
	genetic	on culture as produce or artifact; on symbols.	

In addition to the similarities found between the teachers in this study and the meaning categories of the model, teachers' definitions appeared rooted in the Mexican scene and reflected views held in that setting. Three ways of talking about culture emerged from their discussions, culture as:

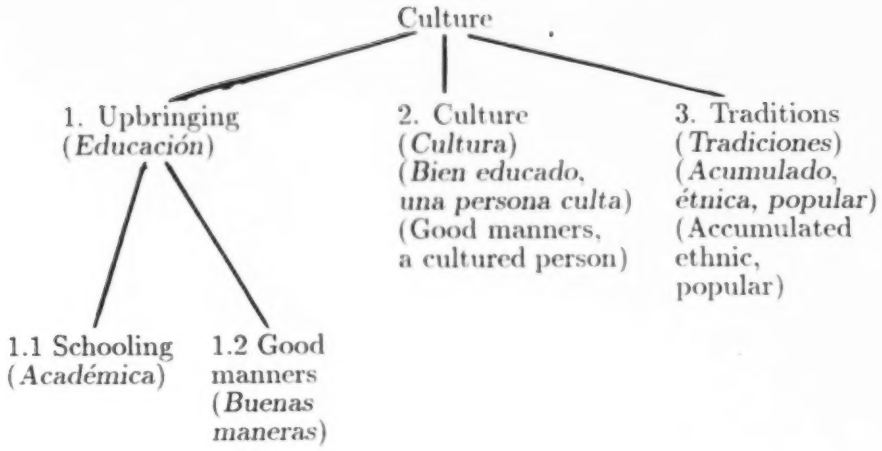


Figure 1: Views of "culture" in Mexico.

The teachers had strong opinions about the importance of culture in foreign language instruction and about the inseparableness of culture and language. While they considered learning about culture to be essential to language learning, they also had difficulty at first in expressing their ideas about what culture meant to them. When asked to define "culture", they often appeared bewildered and overwhelmed by the task of verbalizing the concept, saying, for example, "Oh, my God! It's such an involving word that I really don't know. It means everything to me." Gradually, however, they began to search for a way of expressing what they meant and to overcome the elusive quality of the concept. Some spontaneously used metaphors to highlight the meaning culture held for them and to provide a sort of visual picture on which to hang their abstract ideas. These metaphors appeared to bring together aspects of a teacher's belief system while at the same time were a concrete way to visualize concepts of culture (Pajares, 1992).

The metaphors served as quick snapshots of the mental picture the teachers wanted to convey to the researcher. Some teachers revealed a static view of culture. Their metaphors included a ball of yarn to represent the sum total of experiences a human being has; a large machine with a motor, to represent mechanism of culture; and overlapping circles, to be cultural groups. Others emphasized the changing quality of culture; a mosaic held that image. One teacher associated a mystical feeling with a specific cultural group; he mentioned an impressionistic painting.

In each case when teachers used metaphors to talk about how they perceived of culture, they used this form to enable them to talk about an abstraction (Lakoff & Kovecses, 1987). Through the use of metaphors they were able to convey the ideas they wanted to express (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), making concrete what might be construed as vague for the listener (Lakoff, 1987).

The second phase of this investigation involved a smaller group of teachers, a case study of six teachers of Mexican and non-Mexican origin. The purpose was to follow these teachers throughout a semester during their interaction with students in order to gain insight into the complex relationship between the teachers' cultural conceptions previously mentioned and their actual classroom teaching. The three stages of data collection included "thick description" (Agar, 1980) of classroom interaction with teachers and students, consecutive observations following themes and units of study, and selective observing of emerging patterns. After the classroom observations were completed, a final slate of interviews followed, giving teachers time to reflect on the experience of the semester. These final interviews were a forum for the teachers to comment on their impressions of the semester

and their ideas about culture to see if they had evolved or remained the same. The researcher used some of the same questions in the final interviews as had been used in phase one, questions such as: **Can you tell me about what culture means to you?** Has that changed during the semester? **How do you feel culture is involved in language teaching?** How was it involved in your class this semester?

One of the first observational patterns that emerged was that there was a distinction between classroom teacher/student verbal interaction about linguistic aspects and that about cultural aspects. Linguistic analysis and practice dominated instruction during the semester in the teaching of all six teachers. The greater portion of the teacher discourse was devoted to directives and elicitation, often following a discourse structure of teacher elicit/student reply, teacher acceptance, evaluation and comment (Coulthard, 1977; Holmes, 1983). Teacher questioning (yes/no, what and rhetorical) monopolized large chunks of classroom discourse involving English-speaking cultures (Brook, Schlue & Campbell, 1980) and served to identify discourse organization (Hoey, 1983).

When teachers initiated the insertion of information about English-speaking cultures, it was done in several ways, some of which could be seen in Byram's (1991) findings about how cultural information enters language teaching. In other words, they included factors which contribute to a student's image of a foreign culture, such as teacher anecdotes, teacher facts and artifacts from English-speaking cultures. The present study documents occasions where all of these inputs were supplied spontaneously by the teachers. The teachers' cultural statements (or TCIIs, teachers' cultural information inserts) were for the most part brief, or were encapsulated information, frequently seen as talking "off the subject". For example,

Ruth, a teacher of non-Mexican origin told about an experience she had had as a student in a California university during a lesson where she was explaining the construction of verb forms. She quickly associated the deep grammatical structure with a memory of a Chinese professor she had at her university:

> I remember I had a professor from China. He was hyperactive (laughter). He would jump up to the blackboard and draw these trees. I didn't know Chomsky's deep structure then. Now....**end of parentheses**. (Emphasis is researcher's).

She quickly returned to talking about the grammatical constructions she had been discussing, suggesting as she said "**end of parentheses**", that she noticed she had been talking about a personal incident.

Minimal information about English-speaking cultures appeared during instruction. Not only was the amount of cultural information introduced into the classroom limited in relation to the teaching of linguistic aspects of the language, but cultural information was often treated by the teachers as departure from the main task of teaching the language or as a subject separate from language teaching, at times appearing as narrated culture capsules. A dichotomy appeared between culture and language during teachers' instructional behavior. This culture-language interface appears to question the assumption of their inseparability (Brooks, 1986 among many others).

The case studies showed some degree of relationship between teacher beliefs about the nature of culture and the corresponding teacher's behavior even though this relationship was variable in intensity and depth among the teachers studied. In most cases, teachers involved students in acquiring knowledge about English-speaking cultures and in revealing this

knowledge. This behavior paralleled the communicative approach (Canale & Swain, 1980; Widdowson, 1978; Wilkins, 1976) to language learning in its emphasis on the active involvement of the student in his learning process. Table 2 represents this relationship:

Table 2: EFL teachers' cultural filters and their instructional behavior in the present study.

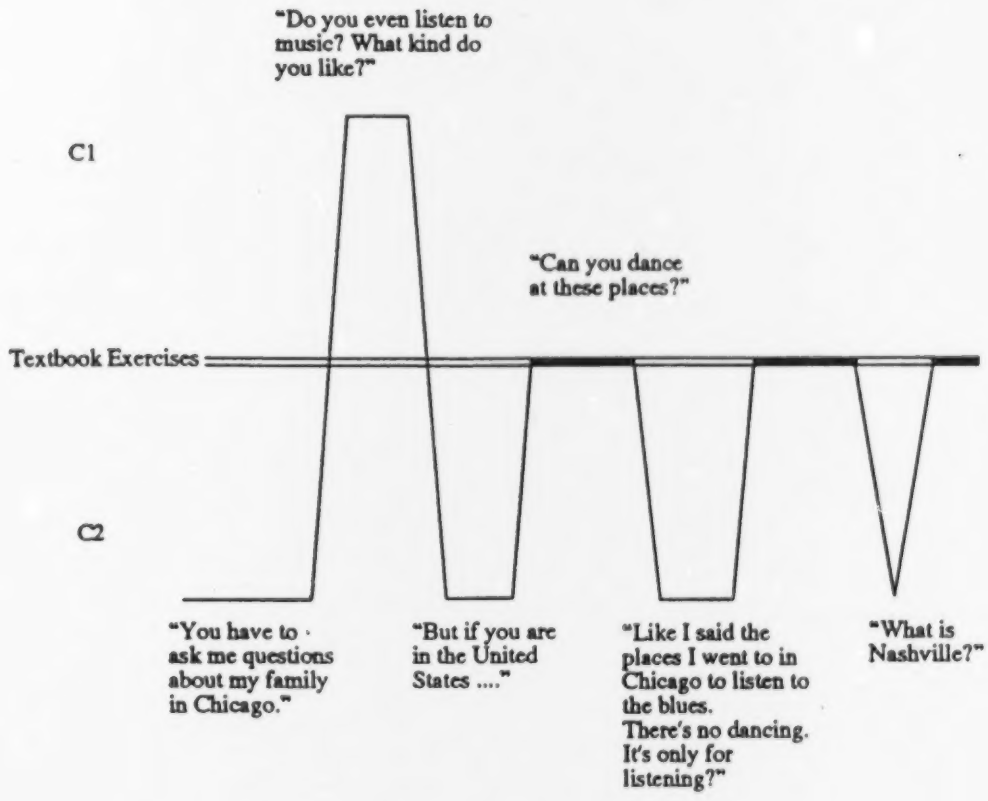
Teacher:	**Culture Filter**	**Instructional Behavior:**
Monserrat:	Culture is knowledge gained through reading	Student analysis of readings
Cathy:	Cultural institutions should be analyzed	Building a cultural knowledge base with students
Ruth:	Culture is the daily life of a group of people	Students reporting current events
Karin:	Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next	Encouraging students to experience culture contact
Veronica:	Culture means a critical attitude toward the world	Students' C1 knowledge and experience
Kevin:	Culture is lived and experienced	Teacher's asides about personal experiences

Cathy, a non-Mexican teacher, focused throughout the semester on the students' building cultural knowledge which would serve as a bank of information students could refer to in understanding the cultural meaning brought to language. She talked about her personal life related to her family in Chicago, about her brother who was a musician and played

drums in a rock bank, about blues concerts she had gone to with him, and about his band and the bars they had played in Chicago. When appropriate to the content of the communicative events the class was working on, Cathy would insert information about herself that would be part of this bank of cultural knowledge. These teacher cultural information inserts helped students learn about another culture, and contrast their own culture (C1) with English- speaking cultures (C2). For example, during the discussion Cathy drew on students' knowledge of Latin American music, contrasting music customs in Mexico City and Chicago. She wanted to show that dancing generally did not occur in country music places while in Latin American folk music places it does.

Cathy's personal interests in society and its institutions were consistent with the techniques she used to bring information about members of her family and about music in Chicago into the classroom. She was able to leave students with knowledge about some institutions which would serve as a starting point for extending their knowledge of English-speaking cultures.

The following diagram of her interaction with students shows how she drew attention to this cultural bank of information:


"Do you even listen to music? What kind do you like?"
C1
"Can you dance at these places?"
Textbook Exercises
C2
"You have to ask me questions about my family in Chicago."
"But if you are in the United States ...."
"Like I said the places I went to in Chicago to listen to the blues. There's no dancing. It's only for listening?"
"What is Nashville?"

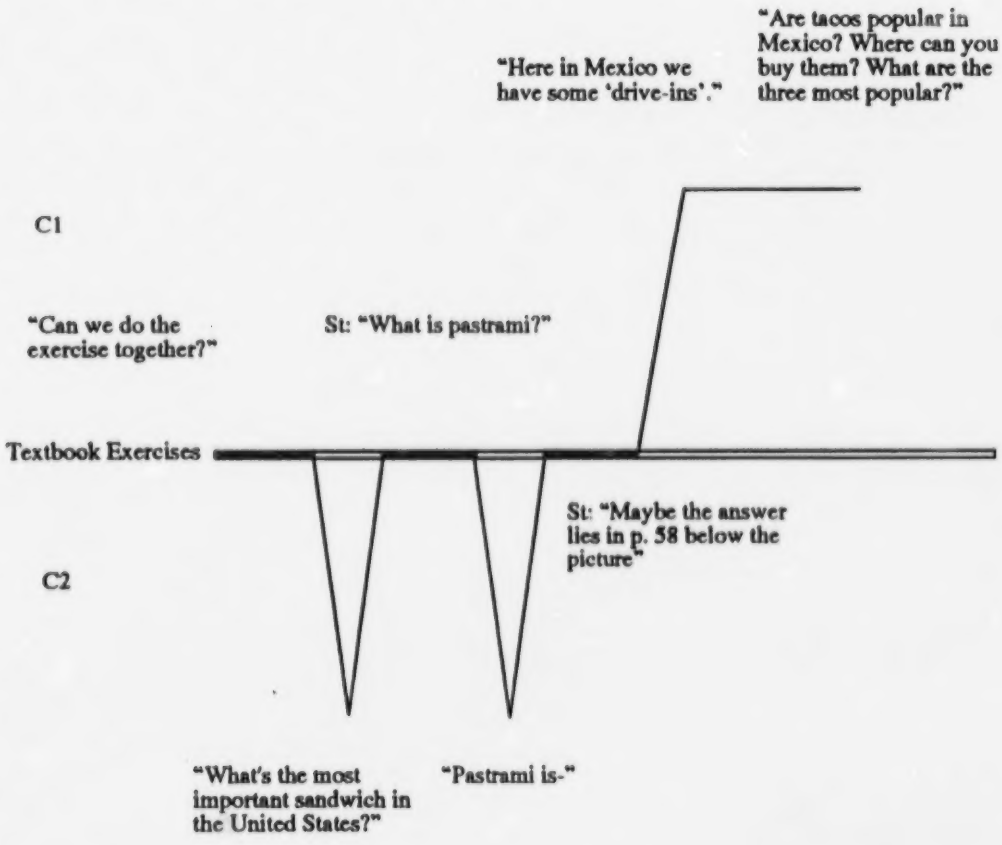
C1: Mexican culture(s)

C2: English-speaking cultures

Figure 2: C1 and C2 verbal exchanges in Cathy's class.

Topic: country music.

A second teacher in the case study who is a Mexican and has lived in Mexico City all her life, Veronica, relied on student knowledge and experience about their common cultural roots rather than create cultural knowledge as Cathy had done. Her tendency during the semester while working with culturally saturated readings was to be concerned with answering exercises related to them, but to quickly move to talk about Mexican life. On one occasion while she directed a lesson based on a reading about sandwiches in the United States, she asked "What is the most important sandwich in the U.S.? The class commented that "Sandwich *es una palabra gringa* (is a "gringo" word)." Veronica, was interrupted again and asked "What is pastrami (a word contained in the text)?" Her reaction gave the impression that she had not had contact with this food. She quickly turned to talking about tacos in Mexico even after a student said "Maybe the answer was on p. 58 below the picture". Figure 3 represents the verbal discourse which followed and Veronica's tendency to talk about the Mexican cultural scene:


"Are tacos popular in Mexico? Where can you buy them? What are the three most popular?"
"Here in Mexico we have some 'drive-ins'."
C1
"Can we do the exercise together?"
St: "What is pastrami?"
Textbook Exercises
St: "Maybe the answer lies in p. 58 below the picture"
C2
"What's the most important sandwich in the United States?"
"Pastrami is-"

C1: Mexican culture(s)

C2: English-speaking culture(s)

Figure 3: C1 and C2 verbal exchanges in Veronica's class.

Topic: sandwiches.

Veronica drew their attention to their knowledge of tacos with a string of questions: Are tacos very popular all over the country? Why are they popular? Where can you buy them? When are they eaten? What are the three most popular? Her behavior on this occasion and others was strongly tied to her insecurity talking about English-speaking cultures. She defended herself by hiding behind one of the masks she talked about in the interviews that she as a person wears depending on the situation and people with whom she is talking. This was the mask of a foreign language teacher.

The other four teachers in the case study reflected their different filters in their classroom teaching. Montserrat, Ruth, and Karin, like Cathy and Veronica, involved the students in ways which called for the students to actively participate in acquiring cultural knowledge about English-speakers. Kevin was more teacher-centered in his approach to learning, occasionally volunteering cultural asides related to his experiences as a native speaker of English. (Note Table 1.)

A number of interacting factors contribute to the teachers' instructional behavior related to culture. These factors are represented in Figure 4:

Beliefs	**Cultural Knowledge**
About the nature of culture	About C1 and C2
Personal History	**Training**
Cultural background Culture contact Language experiences	EFL teacher training degrees in Applied Linguistics or related fields. Pre- and in- service sessions. Academic studies and degrees.
Teaching Experience	**Interest in C1 and C2**
EFL language teaching	Attitudes toward C2s

Figure 4: Factors found in the present study contributing to teacher instructional behavior.

These factors were present in the preliminary study and in the six-teacher case study.

Numerous concerns are reflected in these factors, such as: Why teach culture? What do teachers expect to accomplish with culture as they teach a language? What positions do they take? Is cultural awareness and understanding an objective to be reached in foreign language courses or is it outside the domain of the courses?

It was obvious during the interviews with the teachers that they had a storehouse of cultural experiences accumulated during contact with English-speaking cultures. However, they generally refrained from volunteering their knowledge. Why does this occur? The factors above suggest several possibilities. Negative attitudes toward political systems associated with governments of first-world English-speaking countries surfaced as a primary concern of teachers who believed that their students were learning English as a *lingua franca*

and did not want cultural topics forced upon them. Teachers' sensitivity to student negative feelings might have inhibited their responding freely and led them to keep their own experiences outside of their teaching. For a Mexican teacher concern over being considered a *malinchista* (lover of foreign things) may be involved as well. A delicate balance between adding to students' understanding of the meaning of language and social contexts and bragging about C2 experiences has to be reached.

The socio-political and historical setting of the students and that of their teachers, and that associated with speakers of the language being learned are intertwined in the responses of the teacher and learner and raise interesting questions which should be pursued in future research. In addition to raising questions which need to be answered by further research, the present study could be used to generate proposals for EFL teacher training at various sites around the world in addition to Latin America. Institutional support for pre-and in-service sessions would be one excellent way for teachers to have the opportunity to address the problem of culture in language teaching. Issues such as why one should teach culture in foreign language courses and what aims should drive the teaching of culture in basic language courses could initiate discussion during such sessions. In addition, in-service sessions to encourage teachers to become sensitive to and skilled in the teaching of culture would address sociolinguistic competence in language teaching. Instead of providing prescriptive proposals, teachers would be involved in a dynamic that will be reflecting on the beliefs they hold and drawing on their teaching experiences with culture and language to become more effective teachers of English.

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